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Education and Training for Library Management

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Column Editor's Note. *This JLA column will consider issues of education and training for management positions in libraries and other information organizations from the perspectives of both the provider and the recipient. The column will appear in odd-numbered issues of the journal and focus on management education/training at various stages of the individual's career including the effectiveness of these efforts, their content, and the specific challenges of teaching and learning within the field of librarianship. The column will address both theoretical and practical concerns. Prospective authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at aa3805@wayne.edu*

MANAGING SUDDEN LOSS

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ABSTRACT. *Managers often face tough, emotional situations at work. One of the biggest is guiding employees and departments successfully through the loss of a coworker. Not only are there emotional components but there are also more technical and procedural responsibilities that may be overlooked. These facilities, technological, and human resources tasks need to be handled sensitively and in a timely manner. Remembering whom to contact, what property needs to be considered, and how to produce final paychecks are just a few of the concerns managers will face in a trying time. This guide aims to serve as a checklist of the basic components and tasks managers will face after the sudden loss of an employee.*

KEYWORDS *management, grief, death, human resources*

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, there may come a time in one's career where a manager is forced to deal with the sudden death of an employee. As opposed to working with an employee with a long-term illness, a manager may have less than a few months' notice, or even no notice, before a coworker dies. In all cases of loss, there will be grief and emotion; with sudden unexpected loss, managers may forget some of the more procedural things that need to be done.

As opposed to working through the more sensitive emotional issues, which are briefly summarized below, the purpose of this article is to guide managers through some of the management issues they may face after the sudden death of a coworker. Though this information may also be useful for dealing with an employee leaving abruptly or abandoning their job, it is intended to aid in preparation for facing the death of a staff

COPING WITH LOSS

There are a number of helpful articles that cover the more sensitive and emotional aspects of coping with a coworker's death, though not many

are represented in the library literature. Managers should be conscious of the emotional side of loss as well as literature that offers helpful information about guiding coworkers through grief.

Elisa Topper's 2008 article "Dealing with death of an employee" focuses on how a supervisor should deal with the death of a staff member, which can impact all members of the library staff. Supervisors need to be prepared to work through the death of an employee, even though nobody expects to face this situation. From personal experience, she notes that the death of a member of the "work family" can have an impact that lasts for many months. Supervisors need to understand this and manage the staff through that complex process. There is an obvious emotional toll on the staff, but there is also an issue of compromised productivity. According to a study cited in the article, employee grief has an impact of more than \$75 billion per year on USA companies.

From her experience, she knows how hard it is for an organization to do everything right when responding to an employee's death and that resources are an issue, especially for smaller organizations. But, even if substantial resources are available, the library staff will always look to their supervisors to set an example on a daily basis. As opposed to managing only after a loss, Topper also offers advice for dealing with terminally ill staff members who continue to work at the library. She mentions the importance of simple gestures and of providing the terminally ill staff member with a calm and quiet workplace so they can be productive for a longer period of time.

Topper urges supervisors to focus on the practical issues necessary to keep the library running smoothly. As difficult as it might be, employees deserve to be told quickly and sensitively with face-to-face contact being the best method (Grensing-Pophal, 2000, p. 30). This delicate issue will be upsetting for a number of the person's coworkers. If possible, address it through direct personal contact with groups. Flexibility and patience are required because each staff member's needs and time frame for the grieving process are different.

She summarizes key steps to take after the death of a workplace family member. They include:

- covering the person's job responsibilities to assure uninterrupted service to the library and the public,
- having a counselor available for the staff, and
- supporting, assisting, and communicating with the family.

Making a counselor available is an excellent way to support staff (Topper, 2008, p. 585). There are several possible service providers to consider such as chaplains or the employer's assistance program

(Pergander, 2008, p. 82). In some cases, managers might need to refer some employees to professionals to help those employees cope with the death (Keresztes & Wegner, 2006, p. 33).

Assist staff by giving them time to attend the coworker's funeral (Keresztes & Wegner, 2006, p. 33; Topper, 2008, p. 585). This can help them recover and reach emotional closure, even though the mourning process will not end with the funeral because grieving a death is often a long and complex process that is extremely individual. Another way to help staff achieve closure and move through the grieving process is a memorial service at work (Keresztes & Wegner, 2006, p. 32-33). If such a memorial service is held, invite the family and ask how they would like memorial donations handled (Keresztes & Wegner, 2006, p. 32-33). Memorial services can take many forms. The organization may hold a short period of silent reflection or host a gathering where employees can come together to share stories. Staff may want to collect donations to give to a preferred charity of the coworker, start a scholarship or memorial fund, or work with their institution to plant a tree or hang a plaque honoring their colleague.

Acknowledge that grief may return as time goes on; periodic check-ins are warranted since grief could surface again. There are certain times of year when that employee would have done specific projects, or the rehiring process may spark memories in coworkers. Intense emotions such as anger, irritability, weariness, sadness, or guilt may appear months after the death (Pergander, 2008, p. 82). Employees may show delayed grief in various ways, such as lateness, withdrawal from coworkers, or difficulty focusing (Keresztes & Wegner, 2006, p. 33). If managers see these or other symptoms, they should discuss options with human resources and the institution's professional assistance programs (Keresztes & Wegner, 2006, p. 33).

MANAGING THROUGH LOSS

Aside from the emotional components of mourning the sudden death of an employee or working with staff to manage their grief, there are many managerial and administrative components to consider. Whom should you inform about the death? What is the technological impact of losing an employee? What should happen to institutional property versus personal property? What other small things might be overlooked but are still important? Below are communication, facilities, property, technology, and human resource considerations for managers.

Communication

As soon as a sudden loss is known, contact the head of the library, and the library's administrative office. This office will be extremely helpful in not only understanding the inner workings of the library's and the institution's human resource processes, but they may also have suggestions on whom else to contact. By involving administration early, many issues can be avoided because the appropriate processes will be followed correctly the first time instead of having to backtrack and undo mistakes.

While it is best to notify immediate coworkers in person, this may not physically be possible—perhaps the employee's direct manager is away at a conference or on personal medical leave. A senior employee in the department should deliver the news, someone well known to employees, as opposed to human resources or library administration. If there is no way to deliver the information to coworkers in person, craft a modest email message about what has happened, stating simply that the employee has passed and that more information is forthcoming. Additionally, brief content about counseling/assistance programs your organization offers may be included.

It is also customary to make an official announcement, whether verbally or in writing, to all library staff and the organization as a whole. This can be done by the direct supervisor or the head of the library. The content of the announcement to staff and library media should be short and respectful, with basic information about the employee and their history in the library, when they died, and what funeral/memorial plans have been made public. No private medical information should be shared (such as cause of death). Only state what had been made public by the employee or is shared by the employee's family. This will, of course, bring questions, so managers should be prepared and make time to respond.

Another important group to contact is the institution's human resources office. They should have an intimate understanding of the processes and procedures surrounding the death of an employee. This will ensure that there are no missteps, which could result in delays, questions, or problems. The human resources office may also be able to provide services to help fellow employees handle the loss and deal with grief. Below is a non-comprehensive, but helpful list of contacts that may need to know about the employee's passing.

Whom to contact:

- Administrator, director, dean
- Human resources
- Other local or system libraries
- Facilities department
- IT department
- Mailroom

- Relevant vendors
- Relevant faculty and academic departments
- Community service groups with which the employee worked
- Grants or Research office; Institutional Review Board; other campus collaborators
- Committees on which the employee served

Facilities and Property

Aside from simply notifying the correct offices and people, there are a number of tasks that managers may need to complete on behalf of the employee. These are usually similar to the traditional offboarding an employee who is leaving the library. Employees often have items that are property of the institution and need to be returned. Managers may need to work with the employee's family to gather some of these things; the institution may have procedures for obtaining them. Some of these types of items include:

- Keys or keycards
- Identification card
- Parking permit
- Institutional assets, like electronic devices (cell phones, laptops, tablets, hard drives, flash drives)
- Books checked out from the library
- Procurement cards or credit cards
- Uniforms
- Other equipment

The employee's work area will need to be reviewed and cleaned. Consider their mailbox, locker, office, and desk. Given the emotional connection of the manager and employee, it may be helpful to ask someone from outside the department to gather and box the employee's items. If there are personal items, send them to the family. However, when accomplishing these tasks, be mindful that the empty space left by a cleaned desk or removed mailbox could be upsetting to other employees. Do not do these things in the immediate few days after the loss.

- Clean out their mailbox; consider putting up a sign up indicating to forward the mail to a particular person or department
- Remove items from their locker
- Do not forget to look in the refrigerator for food the employee may have left behind
- Remove their name from the in-out board

Technology

Since technology permeates daily life, carefully consider the technological issues of a sudden demise. Work with the IT Department and systems librarian, if there is one, to make sure the employee's access is terminated and all of their accounts are closed. Remember to think about:

- Main computer workstation logins
- Integrated library system login
- Library services logins (such as LibGuides, DeskTracker, ILLiad)
- External service logins (such as OCLC for cataloging)
- University-licensed software installed on personal devices
- Social media accounts managed for the library

Sudden loss does not allow time to plan; there could be smaller items that are overlooked while taking care of the larger tasks. These could include:

- Removing them from email distribution lists
- Asking for temporary access to the employee's email and calendar for redistributing projects and for reviewing, canceling, or reassigning upcoming appointments
- Removing the employee from websites and directories
- Forwarding communication (voicemails and emails) to another person or department; ensure that the recipient is aware of the situation, and able to respond appropriately to professional and personal inquiries

Human Resources

The institution's human resources staff should be able to guide a manager through some of the personnel issues related to the death of an employee. Many of the responsibilities below, however, may have to be handled directly by the manager. Managers should also be aware of which ones can be delegated to potentially reduce the emotional burden on the manager. For the tasks below, ensure you respect the late employee's family's wishes for confidentiality (Topper, 2008, p. 586). The manager should set the right example for the staff.

TERMINATE FMLA

If the employee was using benefits through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), they will need to be officially terminated. Most likely, this will be coordinated through the institution's FMLA coordinator or human resources department. Some things to keep in mind when discussing

terminating this benefit are what kind of leave time was being used and how much there is left. Investigating this is important because many times vacation leave may be paid to the family if it was not used through FMLA.

TIMEKEEPING

Ensuring accurate entry and approval of time is extremely important so that final paychecks are issued correctly and that other paperwork can be processed quickly. Depending on the rules of the institution, a supervisor might not be able to both enter time on behalf of the employee and approve that time. If this is the case, seek assistance from an administrative assistant or another colleague who can enter time as the employee to leave the supervisor free to approve the time. However, the supervisor should be prudent about whom they ask to perform this function to avoid negative emotions for coworkers. Managers should also be aware of the timekeeping responsibilities of the deceased employee. If this employee approved or managed other's time, this process should quickly be transferred to another person so that there is no delay in paychecks for anyone else in the department.

FISCAL

Wrapping up the monetary aspects of an employee's tenure should take into account all the things the employee is owed. Administration, human resources, or the payroll office should be able to guide managers through arranging the delivery of their final paycheck and any travel reimbursements they are due. Discuss with those offices how to direct the employee's family about insurance policies as well. Final payout of vacation or sick time may occur, depending on institutional policies, so managers should also verify those balances. The manager may need to work with the employee's family to make sure the paycheck or reimbursements get to the right place.

REHIRING

When looking to fill the vacant position, managers should consider a reassessment of the job. This allows not only for the department to see if anything could be updated or changed but it also allows the new person not to feel like a surrogate for the deceased employee. The manager should look at the position's job description and what parts are absolutely required by the position and what parts allow for more flexibility. By making changes to the flexible duties performed within a certain position, the manager can help their team see the newly hired employee as more of a

fresh start as opposed to a replacement. Managers should try to help the new employee not feel like they have a specific role to fill but that they are a new part of the overall team with their own set of strengths.

By showcasing a new employee's strengths and what they can bring to the team, a manager can help stave off workplace ostracism. This type of ostracism is usually the perception by the new employee that they are being excluded by others in the workplace (Williams, 2001). This typically occurs when the new person is seen by their coworkers as a direct replacement for the previous employee. Avoiding ostracism at all costs is important for any unit because the work of the new employee will typically suffer, thereby bringing down the moral and productivity of the whole department. However, if the manager uses the opportunity of a new hire to create a culture of growth and forward thinking, the unit will see the new person for what they can bring to the team; and the new employee will feel more accepted in their workspace.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While it is ideal to be prepared for sudden loss and have a neat checklist to run through, not every circumstance around a death at work, sudden or otherwise, will be contained in the above considerations. Managers should try to not expect perfection from themselves in their response to this situation, given this is something that one does not have to manage frequently. If mistakes are made, acknowledge the error and move on.

The unthinkable is that the employee passes away in the workplace. Check institutional protocols for notifying family. In some cases, it may fall to the manager to notify family members; and the manager will need to be prepared to share this information sensitively and tactfully while taking time to answer any questions they may have. Otherwise, library administration or human resources may make the notification. If an employee dies on the premises, ensure that the local police are notified as well as the institution's risk management office and whatever library board exists. Police and risk management should be able to assist in removal of the body.

If the employee's passing is due to suicide or if it was particularly violent, more comprehensive care should be offered to employees. Sudden death can be shocking, but a violent death or suicide that comes without warning may bring up different feelings in coworkers other than just grief and sadness—there may be extreme shock, despair, anger, and confusion over “not knowing why” it happened (Magellan Healthcare, 2002). The human resources or employee assistance programs may be able to

specifically bring in a suicide-survivor program or counselor that specializes in domestic violence to help employees understand.

A final complicating factor is if the employee has family working in the same department or institution. Aside from allowing time for grief, encourage other staff to be patient and understanding in working with that employee. Redistribute work temporarily; and, if the library intends to conduct any sort of a memorial, include the family member in planning. Memorials for the employee could be a ceremony within the library or broader community or creating a memorial fund in the name of the employee to support the library or school. Work with administrators within your organization to determine what options are available.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, managers will never have to work through the sudden unexpected death of a coworker during their tenure. However, it behooves managers to prepare for the situation. It is not morbid to become familiar with related institutional policies and procedures (Topper, 2008, p. 586). Managers should consider documenting employee workloads and department or institutional offboarding procedures now. Identify which of the above tasks can be delegated to workers or departments that are not directly tied to the employee. One way to avoid continuity issues if presented with this unfortunate situation is to engage in ongoing succession planning and cross-training in the unit to better handle a shift in duties for whatever reason.

Managing through loss is a tough process; there are numerous emotional things to contend with and administrative tasks that may go unnoticed at first. This column attempts to group and delineate the managerial aspects to make dealing with this unfortunate situation easier. Above all, managers should not forget to take care of themselves and acknowledge that it is hard “to do everything right when it comes to such an emotional event” (Topper, 2008, p. 584).

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